

**RECRUITING AND RETAINING CLASSIFIED FIREFIGHTERS AS FIRE AND EMS
DISPATCHERS**

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

A major problem facing the Houston Fire Department (HFD) Central Command Fire Alarm Division is an inability to recruit and retain an adequate number of classified firefighters as dispatchers. The problem has forced the department to seek alternative solutions for recruiting and retaining firefighters as dispatchers.

The purpose of this applied research project was to identify how comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments were recruiting and retaining firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers and to utilize the findings to recommend appropriate remedies that would assist the Houston Fire Department recruit and retain firefighters as dispatchers. The descriptive research methodology was used in the research project to answer the following questions:

1. How were comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments staffing their alarm centers?
2. What methods were comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments using to recruit and retain classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers?
3. How were comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments selecting firefighters for dispatch assignment?
4. How many comparable metropolitan fire departments have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers; what were the problems, and what methods were the departments using to solve these problems?

The procedure used to answer the four research questions included a 16-question survey mailed to 113 comparable metropolitan City and/or County Fire Departments. The criteria used to select survey recipients were the size of the department and the population of the area served.

Results of the research indicated that fire department dispatch offices in jurisdictions comparable to Houston shared many common features. The majority of the surveyed departments utilized civilian personnel to staff their communications centers. Most jurisdictions utilized work shifts other than the traditional eight-hour shift.

Recommendations resulting from this research included the following: (a) a length of service commitment, (b) an incentive pay plan, (c) a 12-hour shift configuration, (d) provision for regular overtime, and (d) allowing dispatch positions to be filled from the suppression captain's promotional list.

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INTRODUCTION

The topic chosen for this applied research project was, “Recruiting and Retaining Classified Firefighters as Fire and EMS Dispatchers.”

A major problem facing the Houston Fire Departments (HFD) Central Command Fire Alarm Division is an inability to recruit and retain an adequate number of classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers. The problem has forced HFD’s Central Command Fire Alarm Division to handle an ever-increasing emergency call volume with an inadequate number of qualified dispatch personnel. As a result of the inadequate staffing level, Houston dispatchers have experienced stress related job burnout that has further exacerbated the recruiting and retention problem. Due to the magnitude of the problem, the Houston Fire Department is being forced to seek alternate solutions for recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as dispatchers. The Central Command Dispatch Center is the only location in the City of Houston where Houston Fire Department dispatchers alert stations and dispatch emergency medical and fire suppression personnel to emergency incidents within the city limits of Houston.

The purpose of this applied research project was to identify how comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments were recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers and to utilize the findings to recommend appropriate remedies that would assist the Houston Fire Department recruit and retain classified dispatch personnel.

Descriptive research methods were used to answer the following research questions:

1. How were comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments staffing their alarm centers?
2. What methods were comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments using to recruit and retain classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers?

3. How were comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments selecting firefighters for dispatch assignment?
4. How many comparable metropolitan fire departments have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers; what were the problems, and what methods were these departments using to solve the problems?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Houston Fire Department

The City of Houston is the fourth largest city in the United States, with a population of over 1.8 million people. The city's government provides the citizens of Houston with fire and police protection, civic events, airports, libraries, park facilities, street maintenance, water, garbage collection, and other municipal services. Services are provided through 19 departments consisting of over 20,000 employees.

HFD is responsible for fire suppression, emergency medical response, hazardous material mitigation, fire safety inspection, arson investigations, hydrant inspections, and street indexing within the city limits of Houston. Over 3,150 emergency responders operate from 85 fire stations, strategically positioned to cover an area of approximately 800 square miles. The Houston Fire Department utilizes 270 emergency vehicles to respond to an estimated 75,000 fire and 180,000 emergency medical incidents on an annual basis.

The City of Houston uses a mayoral form of government where the Fire Chief and other department heads report directly to the Mayor. The fire department is one of 19 departments within the City of Houston and is organized into 13 divisions. An Assistant Fire Chief reporting directly to the Fire Chief heads each division.

Central Command Division

One of 13 HFD divisions is Central Command. The Central Command Division provides a myriad of highly specialized and technical services for the department and the citizens of the City of Houston. However, the Division's primary duty is to receive calls for fire and EMS assistance, immediately dispatch the appropriate personnel and equipment to the scene, and record pertinent incident information. The Central Command Dispatch Office is organized into three, eight-hour work shifts, staffed by 75 classified personnel. Classified personnel are selected for dispatch assignment from a pool of Firefighter Engineer/Operators who have successfully tested for the Junior Dispatcher position. An Engineer/Operator who places high enough on the Junior Dispatcher promotional list is selected to fill one of several vacancies that occur annually in the Dispatch Office. The shifts are designed to function most effectively when commanded by a Chief Dispatcher supported by three Senior Dispatchers, 17 Junior Dispatchers and four firefighter Customer Service Officers. The Chief, Senior and Junior Dispatcher ranks in the Central Command Division are equivalent to the District Chief, Senior, and Junior Captain ranks in the Suppression Division. Firefighter Customer Service positions are not tested for and are filled by members restricted to light duty assignment. The purpose of the Customer Service position is to provide a centralized method to dispatch and deploy available non-emergency departmental resources. The 9-1-1 Center transfers citizens calls directly to the fire department's Dispatch Office. At a call-taker position, a dispatcher determines whether an incident is a medical or fire related incident. If the incident is determined to be EMS related, the dispatcher, assisted by the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) System, determines the appropriate ambulance to dispatch based on the caller's answers to a series of medical questions. Based upon the query, the dispatcher sends a First Responder with either a Basic Life Support Unit (BLS) or an

Advanced Life Support Unit (ALS) and may, also, provide pre-arrival instructions until the first emergency unit arrives at the scene. When giving pre-arrival instructions, the dispatcher must follow an exact protocol as written by the Medical Director. Incidents are queued to one of two dispatch positions. The CAD System distributes these queued incidents and continues to monitor the availability of emergency units. After the CAD System selects the units for dispatch and creates an incident number, the dispatcher has the choice of utilizing one of four alerting systems. Depending on whether certain stations being alerted are experiencing radio equipment problems, the dispatcher may be required to utilize all four methods to ensure that an alarm is successfully sent. The four alerting systems are the Microwave Alerting System, an UHF Alerting System, a VHF Alerting System, or the Public Telephone System.

Dispatch Work Demand

The Dispatch Office received and processed a total of 372,984 emergency calls in 1998. Even though the above figure represents an extremely heavy workload, it still does not provide an accurate picture of the work performed by Houston Dispatchers. In addition to processing emergency fire calls, the Dispatch Office processes thousands of administrative calls directly related to actual fire emergency calls. For example, a simple car fire can generate approximately four calls: 1) Sending the responding fire engine on the fire frequency, 2) contacting an Arson Supervisor, if arson is suspected, 3) contacting the Police Department, and 4) contacting a wrecker, if needed. Likewise, a two-alarm fire may generate up to 15 calls. At present, there is not a mechanism to definitively tally the number of fire and EMS support calls received by the Dispatch Office. However, as can be determined from the information provided a Dispatch Office adequately staffed with well-trained Dispatchers is the most essential element of a progressive and well managed fire department.

In December 1994, the Central Command Division's five-year forecast included a report that recommended an increase of classified Dispatchers to 72 by 1998 and an overall increase to 76 by the year 2000. In March 1996, City Council approved the creation of one Senior Dispatcher position and four Junior Dispatcher positions in recognition of the substantiated increases in activities in this section, bringing the total number of authorized dispatch positions to the current level of 61. However, due to the lack of personnel increases in prior years, the five positions provided only the minimum number of personnel to staff the section.

Exacerbating Houston's dispatcher staffing problems and also affecting the staffing of alarm centers across the country is the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). In 1985, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of compulsory standards for local governments. The ruling in *San Antonio v. Garcia*, made local governments subject to minimum wage, overtime pay, and stringent record keeping provisions for employees. The specific statute affecting employees of fire protection agencies is contained in the Code of Federal Regulations (29 CFR Part 553), which specifically exempts firefighters from the overtime provisions for employees working in excess of 40 hours per week. However, in a September 24, 1998, *Opinion on Partial Summary Judgement, Vela v. Houston*, the United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas has resolved that "Houston Fire Department Dispatchers are not exempt from the overtime provision for employees working in excess of 40 hours in a seven day week" (p. 3). The courts mandate forced the Houston Fire Department to switch to the current eight-hour three-shift work schedule that places the city in compliance with the Court's judgement. Because of the severe negative atmosphere in the Dispatch Office created by the implementation of an unfavorable work shift and possible civilianization, the division has been unable to attract the personnel necessary to maintain the required minimum staffing level of 61 dispatchers. The Dispatch

Office is the only area of HFD where employees have actually requested demotions to lower paying Engineer/Operator jobs in order to escape what they believe is an intolerable workload brought on by inadequate staffing. Since 1980, 36 classified dispatch personnel have demoted from the rank of Junior Dispatcher, 18 employees have refused to accept the promotion to the rank when offered, and 33 dispatchers have accepted lateral promotions to other divisions within the Department. If the dispatcher-staffing problem is not resolved satisfactorily, the citizens of Houston will be placed at a significant risk of Fire, EMS, and Hazardous Material incidents.

This project addressed the applied research requirements associated with the Executive Leadership Course at the National Fire Academy. This paper relates to the Managing Change Unit of the Executive Leadership Student Manual. The purpose of the Managing Change Unit is to provide specific tools and techniques to facilitate and manage organizational change when change is required. The project specifically relates to the Managing Change Unit's focus on the impact of organizational change on individuals and organizational processes and performance. The Houston Fire Department Dispatch Office is a critical part of the community's public safety infrastructure and its proper staffing is essential.

The results of this study are of paramount importance to the safety of the citizens of Houston and the operational efficiency of the department. The intent of this research was to provide information that would assist the Houston Fire Department in developing the best practices for recruiting and retaining classified personnel as dispatchers. A communications center fully staffed with highly motivated well trained dispatchers who are knowledgeable of fire suppression and EMS operations will guarantee an appropriate and timely fire department response to each and every incident.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review began with a review of available printed material relative to recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers. In recognition of the fact that civilian personnel staffs most dispatch offices, the literature search included data relative to civilian dispatch retention, recruiting, and staffing methods.

McMillian (1991) describes the field of emergency communications and the new organizational term that came with it, civilianization. In its early stage of development, civilianization was the replacement of uniformed firefighters and police officers in the dispatch office with civilian personnel. Those employees were still employees of their respective departments, i.e., police dispatchers worked for police departments and fire dispatchers worked for fire departments. However, starting in the early 1970's, some jurisdictions, in search of tax dollar savings, began combining their separate dispatch facilities into an autonomous agency, thereby, creating the Emergency Communications Center staffed exclusively with civilian personnel. Bethune, Boike, Castro, Cummings, Thebault, and Thompson (1988) concluded that 63 percent of western fire departments predominantly used civilian personnel. "Eighty percent of reporting agencies have an all civilian staff, or are phasing in an all civilian staff" (Broughman, 1995, p. 15). Cummings (1990) revealed that in a survey of 154 departments completed in 1986, "only twelve used uniformed personnel exclusively for their dispatch function" (p. 12).

McMillian, Bethune et al, Broughman, and Cummings influenced this paper by providing solid information on how fire and rescue departments are staffing their alarm centers.

NFPA Standard Number 1221, 1994 Edition, addressed the subject of communications center staffing with the following statement:

Communication Centers handling more than 600 calls per year shall have a sufficient number of operators to affect prompt receipt and processing of request for fire department services as follows: (1) Ninety-five percent of alarms shall be answered within 30 seconds, and in no case shall the initial operators response to an alarm exceed 60 seconds; (2) The dispatch of the appropriate fire services shall be made within 60 seconds after completed receipt of an emergency alarm (NFPA 1221, 1994, p. 8).

Fischel (1996) noted that, “certain jurisdictions choose to ignore the fact that poor 9-1-1 answering times and under-trained 9-1-1 operators are largely a result of inadequate staffing” (p. 72). Fischel (1996) also found that throughout the country where 9-1-1 centers failed to perform as expected, with disastrous results, close analysis of the situation, after the fact, found the cause to be a chronic pattern of understaffing.

The NFPA standards influenced this research by providing the staffing requirements of an effective communications center. Fishel influenced this paper by pointing out that inadequate staffing is often overlooked when management is assessing poor performing communication centers.

Furey (1996) stated in an article that, “In the past, required knowledge (was) said to be the three R’s: reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic [sic]. However, for telecommunications managers, these have been replaced by recruiting, retention, and reward” (p. 46). He goes on to indicate that there is no more valuable skill for communications managers than finding and keeping quality emergency dispatchers.

Furey (1996) recommends the following methods for recruiting and retaining emergency communications personnel:

- Only consider candidates who are experienced in time critical public service work.

- Give consideration to past experiences working in a confined space under stringent guidelines.
- Provide a method that will allow a candidate to spend a day or night in the Communications Center prior to accepting a position in the facility.
- Administer a job aptitude examination for all job candidates.
- Do not over react to employee turnover. Statistics indicate that the average employee remains only five years in any job.
- Provide a comprehensive training program. To be both effective and happy, employees have to know what is expected of them and how to complete the task.
- Empower communications personnel through the use of quality circles and other productivity techniques.
- Create a quality control program using tape-logging equipment. In addition to its regular functions, the tape logging system should also be used to recognize outstanding achievers (p. 47-48).

Strock (1996) found that dispatchers are less affected by stress in jurisdictions where they are able to transfer back to the field for relief. Strock also concludes that good salaries and benefit packages are a must to retain these employees. Star (1990) noted that fire departments must recognize the dispatcher as a vital link in their emergency operations if they are going to continue to recruit and retain classified firefighters as dispatchers. Land (1992) reported that dispatchers who worked 12-hour shifts were more satisfied with their jobs. Land believed that 12-hour rotating shifts were a benefit that attracted and helped retain dispatchers. Miraglia (1997) indicated that “The most popular work plan is the 4 –10 shift followed closely by the 3 –

12 and 4 – 11 shifts. Only one-third of the agencies are using a traditional 5 – 8 work plan” (p. 30).

Furey, Strock, Star, Land, and Miraglia influenced this project by identifying viable methods fire and rescue departments could use to recruit and retain dispatch personnel.

Holt, in 1991, wrote a book addressing the management of fire communication centers. Holt acknowledged the critical role dispatchers play in regards to firefighter safety. He emphasized the need for improved dispatcher selection as a critical element of an effective emergency communications center. Pivetta (1993) noted a need for carefully selected, highly trained, and administratively supported dispatch personnel in almost every city. Agencies face liability if they do not employ skilled and knowledgeable workers. The Fire Department Communications Manual (FEMA, 1995) stated, “If the Communications Center is staffed by sworn firefighters, the same attention should be given to their selection as that given to civilian recruits. The same talents and interest levels are necessary in sworn (uniformed) personnel as in non-sworn (civilian) personnel” (p. 2-21). Schaper (1998) pointed out that, “employee selection for the position of dispatcher is paramount. The truth of the matter is that not every one can handle the job. Therefore, a written test, training, timely evaluations, and a proper working test period should be provided” (p. 62).

Holt, Pivetta, the Communications Manual and Schaper influenced this project by providing data that clearly emphasizes the critical importance of properly selecting firefighters for dispatch assignment.

“The crisis involves the recruitment and retention of public safety dispatchers. Over the last five years, more and more agencies are finding it difficult to find qualified people to work as dispatchers; and even more difficulty retaining these dispatchers” (Miraglia, 1996, p. 96).

Salafia (1993) found that, “the average professional life of an emergency dispatcher in this country is 3.2 years” (p. 64). Strock (1996) stated that, “it is often difficult to find uniformed personnel that want to work in the Dispatch Center. However, civilians can be hired out of a much larger potential candidate pool” (p. 8). Star (1990) wrote that, “high attrition is a major problem in the Tulsa Fire Dispatch Operation. The Tulsa Fire Department Communications Section experienced an average annual turnover rate of 18% over the forty- (40) year study” (p. 16). “Chesterfield County’s Emergency Communications Center is approaching a crisis due to its inability to recruit adequate numbers of new dispatchers. Since March 1996, the Center has experienced a significant loss both in numbers and experience” (Avsec, 1998, p. 5). Avsec (1998) concludes that the factor of experience is central to the Center’s mission of serving the citizens of Chesterfield County. Avsec (1998) further stated that, “40% of employees who left the job had greater than five years of experience in the Center. These numbers are significant when one considers that dispatchers are considered experienced only when they’ve had four years of experience” (p. 6). Avsec (1998) reported that Metro-Dade Communications Center dispatchers are frustrated because of having to work extra shifts due to under staffing.

McMillian (1991) concludes that when centers are forced to maintain operations with decreased staffing due to employee turnover, existing staff assumes a greater burden. Pivetta (1993) wrote that, “The volume of business handled by an emergency communications center means employees spend more time seated at their positions. In many cases, only breaks and meals may offer any time to get up and move around” (p. 13). Pivetta (1993) further concludes that most people do not respect the dispatcher job because they do not understand its importance.

Salafia, Strock, Star, McMillian, Pivetta, and Asvec influenced this paper by identifying communication centers that were experiencing critical problems maintaining adequate

emergency dispatcher staffing levels. The works presented by these writers further influenced this research by citing specific problems the agencies were experiencing.

Strock (1996) concluded that a relatively high starting salary, a sound training program, and conditions of employment contract would be needed to overcome the reluctance of firefighters to accept dispatch duties. Holt (1992) also concluded that a commitment to training is a key element to overcoming the perceived negative atmosphere of the dispatch office. Bobka (1998) made the following statement in reference to dispatchers, “ They should be made to feel they are the most integral part of your organization because they are, and you should respect and treat them like the valued employees they are” (p. 78). Bobka (1998) also pointed out that communication centers should consider an open schedule concept where employees could choose their own work hours. The Fire Department Communications Manual (FEMA, 1995) noted that, “In Communication Centers staffed by firefighters, the shift sometimes is the same as for personnel assigned to suppression units. For those jurisdictions opting for this approach, consideration must be given to employee effectiveness on shifts that exceed 12 hours” (p. 2-26). Miraglia (1997) stated that, “many departments are using part-time help and job sharing to supplement their staffing levels” (p. 30).

Strock, Holt, Bobka, the Communications Manual, and Miraglia influenced this research project by identifying methods and techniques that various departments are using to solve dispatch related staffing problems.

In summary, review of the available literature suggested that most jurisdictions recognized that recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as dispatchers is a critical problem. The reviewed literature also suggested that there are available methods and techniques that could be utilized to solve most of these problems. However, the literature review did not provide much

data on jurisdictions that are actually utilizing these methods and techniques. Therefore, it is incumbent upon fire department leaders to thoroughly research the subject of classified dispatcher recruiting and retention and apply the appropriate findings to solving this most critical problem.

PROCEDURES

Research for this project began with a review of the City of Houston and Harris County Library Systems for all public and private sectors printed material relative to how comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments were recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers. The review did not provide information that could be utilized to assist the Houston Fire Department in its effort to recruit and retain classified dispatch personnel. Through the inter-library loan process, a review of available literature at the Learning Resource Center (LRC) of the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland, provided several articles and papers appropriate for the research. Also, additional literature reviews conducted at the Houston Fire Department Library and the author's personal library identified several publications that were very useful to the research project. Although these published findings and observations were summarized in the Literature Review, they were too limited in scope and quantity to support the total premise of the research project. The limitation placed on the project by the lack of specific information relative to recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatch personnel in jurisdictions comparable to Houston indicated that a supplemental method of gathering the required information would be necessary. The supplementary method chosen was to conduct a survey of City and/or County Fire Departments whose jurisdictions and fire dispatching requirements were similar to those of the City of Houston. The purpose of the survey was to gather viable information on classified dispatcher

recruiting and retention methods among a variety of other major cities throughout the United States, Canada, and Australia. The goals and objectives of the survey were to accomplish the following:

- Determine how comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments were staffing their alarm centers?
- Determine what methods comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments used to recruit and retain classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers?
- Determine how comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments were selecting firefighters for dispatch assignment?
- Determine how many comparable metropolitan fire departments have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers; what were the problems, and what methods were these departments using to solve the problems?

The survey was mailed to 113 comparable metropolitan City and/or County Fire Departments. The criteria used to select survey recipients were the size of the department and the population of the area served. The small number of departments that could be compared directly with the City of Houston Fire Department somewhat limited the survey research project. The Houston Fire Department provides fire and emergency medical service for a population of 1.8 million and dispatches over 255,000 incidents to 3,150 emergency responders operating from 85 fire stations spread across an 800 square mile radius. Thirty-two departments serving populations of 500,000 or more and 39 departments serving populations of less than 500,000 were surveyed. Surveyed jurisdictions averaged over 500,000 in population and averaged 779 paid personnel. The survey was augmented with a cover letter describing the purpose of the study, instructions for filling out the survey, and a comment indicating that the survey results

would assist the Houston Fire Department in developing the best procedures and practices for recruiting and retaining classified personnel as dispatchers. A copy of the cover letter is provided in *Appendix A*. Potential responders were advised that all answers were confidential and would only be used in conjunction with those of other Fire Chiefs and upper-level fire service managers. A self-addressed envelope was included with the survey to expedite the completion and return rate. Also, for the same reason, the survey was kept very simple and limited. The cover letter advised each survey recipient that a complimentary copy of the survey findings would be mailed to any respondent who provided a name and address at the end of the survey.

The survey was mailed on December 1, 1998, and was due March 1, 1999. By the deadline, 71 or 63% of the surveys were returned. Land (1992) stated, "A large number of factors can affect response rates in mailed questionnaire surveys. A natural question to ask is, what constitutes an adequate response rate" (p. 8). According to Babble (1973), "A response rate of at least 50 percent is adequate for analysis and reporting. A response rate of at least 60 percent is good (and) a response rate of 70 percent or more is very good" (p. 40). Therefore, the 63% return rate from the targeted departments was considered more than adequate for the purpose of this research.

The survey consisted of 16 questions, categorized into 14 opened-end questions, and two forced-choice questions. Included in the *Results Section* are tables that capture the significant factors of the survey. A copy of the survey is found in *Appendix B*.

In addition to the original research questions, numerous other questions were identified in the survey as important to the research project. The original research questions are listed below.

1. How were comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments staffing their alarm centers?

2. What methods were comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments using to recruit and retain classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers?
3. How were comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments selecting firefighters for dispatch assignment?
4. How many comparable metropolitan fire departments have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as Fire and EMS dispatchers; what were the problems, and what methods were these departments using to solve the problems?

Definition of Terms:

- CAD – Computer Aided Dispatch.
- Staffing Method – Civilian, Uniformed or Combination.
- Civilian – Dispatch Office is staffed completely by non-sworn personnel.
- Uniformed – Dispatch Office is staffed completely by sworn personnel.
- Combination – Dispatch Office consist of civilian operators and sworn personnel acting as supervisors or advisors.
- Classified Personnel – Firefighters.
- Sworn Personnel – Firefighters.

RESULTS

Response to the Dispatcher Recruiting and Staff Retention Survey was good. More than 60 percent of the surveys were completed and returned. In addition, many jurisdictions provided detailed information that further described their dispatcher staffing and retention methods.

While it was not practical to include all of the information in this paper, interested departments may contact the author to make inquiries about specific methods. Data from all surveys returned have been collated and are presented in the following tables.

Table 1

Dispatcher Recruiting and Staff Retention Survey Results

I CITY/COUNTY STATE/COUNTRY	II POPULATION	III # OF STATIONS	IV SQUARE MILES	VI # OF PERSONNEL	VI STAFFING METHOD
Vancouver, CAN	550,000	20	50	850	2
Phoenix, AZ	2,000,000	49	1000	1500	1
Hamilton, CAN	450,000	11	434	439	2
Springfield, MO	150,000	11	79	209	1
St. Louis, MO	350,000	30	62	900	1
Corpus Christi, TX	285,000	14	140	388	1
Des Moines, IA	200,000	10	70	286	1
Austin, TX	588,000	40	222	929	3
Charlotte, NC	513,000	32	232	852	1
Akron, OH	223,000	13	62.5	427	3
Fort Worth, TX	490,000	37	300	717	2
Prince George Co., MD	800,000	47	800	650	3
Memphis, TN	750,000	53	400	1647	1
Colorado Springs, CO	380,000	17	193	411	1
Sarasota Co., FL	307,000	22	573	410	3
Omaha, NE	425,000	23	144	600	1
Denver, CO	500,000	30	130	820	2
Dallas, TX	1,200,000	55	378	1815	2
Arlington, VA	187,000	10	28	49	1
Orange Co., CA	1,200,000	60		1350	3
Washington, DC	1,300,000	85	1,000	1500	1
Saint Paul, MN	272,235	16	55	482	3
Tallahassee, FL	232,000	14	672	245	1
Shreveport, LA	197,000	21	112	573	1
VA Beach, FL	430,000	18	310	386	1
Broward Co., FL	639,169	26	200	495	3
Baltimore, MD	650,000	50	90	1600	3
Minneapolis, MN	350,000	20	50	470	1
Long Beach, CA	425,000	23	50	475	1
Fresno, CA	411,600	16	103	269	1
Albuquerque, NM	465,000	19	164	551	2
Los Angeles, CA	3,500,000	102	468	3500	2
Richmond, VA	203,000	20	63	415	1
Buffalo, NY	300,000	23	42	850	2
San Angelo, TX	93,000	7	50	135	1

Note. Column VI) 1) Civilian 2) Uniformed 3) Combination 4) Other

Table 1 (continued)

I CITY/COUNTY STATE/COUNTRY	II POPULATION	III # OF STATIONS	IV SQUARE MILES	VI # OF PERSONNEL	VI STAFFING METHOD
Winnipeg, CAN	650,000	26	100	1120	1
Mississauga, CAN	563,059	17	110	525	3
Calgary, CAN	790,498	29	279	1044	1
Surrey, CAN	500,000	32	435	18	1
Worcester, MA	170,000	12	39	480	1
Jackson, MS	198,000	21	106	400	1
Orange Co., FL	850,000	32	950	802	1
Chicago, IL	2,700,000	102	228	4881	1
Edmonton, CAN	600,000	23	271	890	3
Boston, MA	550,000	33	49	1500	1
Indianapolis, IN	810,000	56	400	800	1
Fremont, CA	250,000	13	100	202	1
Montgomery Co., MD	837,000	33	496	871	2
Honolulu, HI	871,766	41	608	1136	2
Gwinnett, Co., GA	475,000	22	437	65	1
Tacoma, WA	200,000	18	71	425	1
Ventura, Co., CA	423,000	30	875	450	1
Rochester, NY	231,000	17	39	542	1
Prince William Co., MD	276,000	16	350	342	3
Hartford, CT	135,000	12	19	384	1
Columbus, OH	696,000	31	212		2
Santa Clara Co., CA		16	100	210	1
Brisbane, AUS	1,500,000	37	2,012	817	2
Fairfax, Co., VA	920,000	34	444	1,121	3
Detroit, MI	1,000,000	48	143	1,370	1
Grand Rapids, MI	198,000	11	45	255	2
Ottawa, CAN	325,000	14	43	574	3
Perth, AUS	1,800,000	114			3
Cincinnati, OH	364,000	26	79	780	3
Halifax, CAN	340,000	62	2161	1345	1
Washington, D.C.	550,000	34	69	1764	1
Nashville, TN	600,000	35	533	1200	1
Columbus, SC	291,000	28	682	570	1
Oakland, CA	370,000	25	80	500	1
Las Vegas, NV	1,000,000	32	7,900	1,200	1
Tucson, AZ	480,000	17	200	488	1
Averaged Totals	511,377	29	317	779	

Note. Column VI) 1) Civilian 2) Uniformed 3) Combination 4) Other

Table 2

Dispatcher Recruiting and Staff Retention Survey Results

I CITY/COUNTY STATE/COUNTRY	II ANNUAL # of FIRE INCIDENTS	III ANNUAL # of EMS INCIDENTS	IV TYPE DISPATCH SERVICE	V DISPATCH SHIFT HOURS	VI DISPATCH SELECTION METHOD
Vancouver, CAN	30,000	10,000	1,2,5,6	12	3
Phoenix, AZ	40,000	145,000	1,2,3,4,5,6	8	N/A
Hamilton, CAN	21,000	13,000	2	12	5
Springfield, MO	3,400	11,000	1,2,6	8	N/A
St. Louis, MO	20,000	75,000	1,4,5,6	12	N/A
Corpus Christi, TX	15,700	18,000	1,5,6	8	N/A
Des Moines, IA	4,400	12,000	1,4,5,6	8	N/A
Austin, TX	18,200	26,800	2	24	3
Charlotte, NC	20,469	39,500	2,6	8	N/A
Akron, OH	8,300	30,000	1,4,5,6	8	6
Fort Worth, TX	56,000		2,6	12	2,5
Prince George Co., MD	32,298	78,842	1,2,3,4,5,6	12	6
Memphis, TN	40,000	70,000	1,2,3,4,5,6	8	N/A
Colorado Springs, CO					N/A
Sarasota Co., FL	12,000	32,000	1,4,5	8/12	6
Omaha, NE	7,000	23,000	1,2,3,4,5,6	8	N/A
Denver, CO	72,000		2	12	3,5
Dallas, TX	96,598	131,221	1,2,3,4,5,6	24	3
Arlington, VA	6,876	14,738	1,2,3,4,5,6	12	N/A
Orange Co., CA	18,000	50,000	1,4,5,6	24	6
Sacramento, CA	30,000	90,000	1,4	12	N/A
Saint Paul, MN	12,610	29,466	1,2,3,4,5,6	12	4
Tallahassee, FL	10,214		2,6	12	N/A
Shreveport, LA	7,000	17,000	1,2,3,4,5,6	12	N/A
VA Beach, VA	11,000	26,000	1,2,3,4,5,6	8	N/A
Broward Co. FL	19,792	94,222	1,4,5,6	24	1,6
Baltimore, MD	58,925	112,272	1,4,5,6	12	4
Minneapolis, MN	13,000	20,000	2,5,6	8	N/A
Long Beach, CA	5,500	32,500	1,4,5,6	12	N/A
Fresno, CA	7,614	17,501	1,5,6	10	N/A
Albuquerque, NM	8,600	42,300	1,2,3,4,5,6	10/14	2
Los Angeles CA	90,228	262,917	1,2,3,4,5,6	24	2,3
Richmond, VA	8,481	16,643	2,6	8	N/A
Buffalo, NY	13,000	18,000	1	9/15	N/A
San Angelo, TX	3,400	7,000	1,2,3,,5,6		N/A
Winnipeg, CAN	2,000	6,000	1,2,3,4,5,6	12	N/A

Note. Column VI: 1) Seniority (Bid Process) 2) Promotion 3) Request Assignment (Dept. Selects) 4) Injured Firefighters 5) Dept. Assigns (least Sr.) 6) Spec. Assignment

Table 2 (continued)

I CITY/COUNTY STATE/COUNTRY	II ANNUAL # of FIRE INCIDENTS	III ANNUAL # of EMS INCIDENTS	IV TYPE DISPATCH SERVICE	V DISPATCH SHIFT HOURS	VI DISPATCH SELECTION METHOD
Mississauga, CAN	2,054	6,891	2,6	10/14	5
Calgary, CAN	35,000	14,000	2,6	12	N/A
Surrey, Canada	21,263	1,737	2,6	12	N/A
Worcester, MA	12,000	20,000	1,2,3,4,5,6	8	N/A
Jackson, MS	9,789	3,797	1,2,3,6	8	N/A
Orange, Co., FL	49,000	21,000	1,4	12	N/A
Chicago, IL	108,000	276,000	1,2,3,4,5,6,	8	N/A
Edmonton, CAN	29,522	60,386	1	10/14	1
Boston, MA	49,070	24,570	2,6	10/14	N/A
Indianapolis, IN	22,000	88,000	1,4,5,6	12	N/A
Fremont, CA	5,000	12,000	1,2,3,4,5,6	24	N/A
Montgomery Co., MD	52,287	42,781	1,4	12	3
Honolulu, HI	10,798	14,429	1,6	8/16	2
Gwinnett Co., GA	10,000	33,000	1,4,5,6	8	N/A
Tacoma, WA	12,000	18,000	1,5,6	24	1
Ventura, Co., CA	10,000	20,000	1,4,5,6	24	N/A
Rochester, NY					N/A
Prince William Co., MD	5,700	17,850	1,4,5,6	12	6
Hartford, CT	27,447	993		8	N/A
Columbus, OH	23,355	84,160	1,2,3,4,5,6	24	3
Santa Clara Co., CA	16,296	75,000	1,4,5,6	10	N/A
Brisbane, AUS	5,600	12,450	1,5,6	10/14	6
Fairfax Co., VA	19,011	49,836	1,4,5,6	12	2
Detroit, MI	35,166	122,603	1	8	N/A
Grand Rapids, MI	2,057	8,513	1,6	12	2
Ottawa, CAN	14,000	8,000	2	10/14	3
Perth, AUS	21,000		2,6	12	6
Cincinnati, OH	22,000	45,500	1,2,3,4,5,6	8	6
Halifax, CAN	15,140		2,5	12	N/A
Washington, D.C.			1,4,5,6	12	N/A
Nashville, TN	33,849	45,886	2,3,4,5,6	12	N/A
Columbus, SC	10,000	35,000	1,4,5,6	12	N/A
Oakland, CA	2,803	26,773	1,2,3,4,5,6	8	N/A
Las Vegas, NV	26,000	104,000	1,2,3,4,5,6	10	N/A
Tucson, AZ	21,601	61,429	1,2,3,4,5,6	10	N/A
Averaged Totals	25,819	45,668			

Note. Column VI: 1) Seniority (Bid Process) 2) Promotion 3) Request Assignment (Dept. Selects) 4) Injured Firefighters 5) Dept. Assigns (least Sr.) 6) Spec. Assignment

The applied research project's purpose was to identify how metropolitan fire and rescue departments were recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers and to utilize those findings to recommend appropriate remedies that would assist the Houston Fire Department recruit and retain firefighters as dispatchers. Research question number one was utilized to help answer those concerns. The answer to research question number one was derived from Table 1 and is summarized below. At the time of the survey, metropolitan fire and rescue departments comparable to Houston were staffing alarm centers in the following manner:

- 61 % Civilian Dispatch Offices.
- 18 % Uniformed Dispatch Offices.
- 21 % Combination Dispatch Offices.

The second research question attempted to determine what methods comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments were using to recruit and retain firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers. The survey research identified five methods used to recruit and retain classified dispatch personnel in jurisdictions comparable to Houston. The methods are identified below.

- Minimum Commitment – The jurisdiction requires a length of service commitment from all personnel selected for dispatch assignment.
- Incentive Pay – The jurisdiction provides additional pay as an incentive to personnel selected for dispatch assignment.
- Beneficial Shift Hours – The jurisdiction utilizes a dispatch work shift that is favored by dispatch personnel.
- Overtime Provided – Members are allowed regular overtime in order to maintain minimum staffing levels.

- Promotion – Assignment to dispatch is a promotion, usually to Captain or Lieutenant.

The methods are further summarized in Table 3. The survey research also identified 19 jurisdictions that utilized one or more of the five identified staff retention methods. The jurisdiction and method or methods used are identified below.

The City of Austin, Texas has a population of 588,000; 540 paid personnel staff the fire department. The department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The City of Fort Worth Texas has a population of 490,000; 260 paid personnel staff the department. The department requires a three-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The City of Vancouver, Canada has a population of 550,000; 850 paid personnel staff the department. The department requires a three-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The City of Mississauga, Canada has a population of 563,059; 525 paid personnel staff the department. The department requires a one and one half-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The City of Buffalo has a population of 300,000; 540 paid personnel staff the fire department. The department selects firefighters for the position of dispatcher from a civil service promotional list of firefighters who have placed high enough on the list to be selected for an available dispatch position.

The City of Denver, Colorado has a population of 500,000; 820 paid personnel staff the department. The department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The City of Los Angeles has a population of 3,500,000; 3,500 paid personnel staff the department. The department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment. In addition to a two-year length of service commitment, the City of Los Angeles provides a bonus and overtime to firefighters who accepts dispatch positions. Civilian call takers, who receive and code emergency calls into the City's CAD System for subsequent dispatch by uniformed dispatchers, support the Dispatch Office. The department believes their 24-hour platoon shift configuration is also an enhancement to the position.

The City of Dallas has a population of 1,200,000; 1,569 paid personnel staff the department. The department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment. Members are hired back on overtime to maintain minimum staffing. The department believes their unique 24-hours on-duty and 72-hours off-duty schedule is an incentive that draws volunteers from fire and EMS personnel.

The City of Baltimore has a population of 650,000; 628 paid personnel staff the department. The department believes that four days off, provided by the current dispatch work shift, enhances the department's ability to recruit and retain dispatch personnel.

Broward County has a population of 639,000; 495 paid personnel staff the Broward County Fire Rescue department. The department requires dispatch qualified captains assigned to the field to work one shift per month a year in the dispatch office.

The City of Albuquerque has a population of 465,000; 551 paid personnel staff the department. The department believes that four days off, currently provided by the present dispatch work shift, enhances the department's ability to recruit and retain dispatch personnel. In addition to the favorable shift hours, assignment to the Dispatch Office is a promotion.

The City of Edmonton, Canada has a population of 600,000; 890 paid personnel staff the department. The department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

Montgomery County, Maryland has a population of 837,000; 871 paid personnel staff the department. The department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment. Additionally, the department provides incentive pay for all classified firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The City of Tacoma, Washington has a population of 200,000; 425 paid personnel staff the department. The department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

Prince William, County has a population of 276,000; 342 paid personnel staff the department. The department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The City of Columbus, Ohio has a population of 696,000. The Columbus Fire Department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

Fairfax County, Virginia has a population of 920,000; 1,121 paid personnel staff the fire department. The department selects firefighters for the position of dispatcher from a civil service promotional list of firefighters who have placed high enough on the list to be selected for an available dispatch position. Additionally, the department provides incentive pay for all classified personnel selected for dispatch assignment.

The City of Grand Rapids has a population of 198,000; 255 paid personnel staff the department. An assignment to the Dispatch Office is a promotion.

The City of Perth, Australia has a population of 1,800,000. The department requires a three-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

Research question number three is answered in Table 2. The survey research identified six methods that metropolitan departments, comparable to Houston, were using to select firefighters for dispatch assignment. The methods are identified and described below.

- Seniority – Members are selected for dispatch assignment through a process based on seniority.
- Promotion – Members are selected from a classified dispatcher promotional list.
- Member Requests Assignment – The department selects the most qualified candidate through some type of process.
- Injured Firefighters – Injured firefighters are assigned to dispatch because of an inability to perform regular fire fighting duties due to medical reasons.
- Department Assigns – The department selects the least senior member from a Fire Officer promotional list and assigns the member to dispatch.
- Special Assignment – Members are placed in the Dispatch Office temporally, usually as an advisor or liaison in a civilian dispatch office.

Table 3

Dispatcher Recruiting and Staff Retention Survey Results

I CITY/COUNTY STATE/COUNTRY	II MINIMUM COMMITMENT	III INCENTIVE PAY	IV BENEFICIAL SHIFT HOURS	V OVERTIME	VI PROMOTION
Vancouver, CAN	3 yr.				
Phoenix, AZ	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hamilton, CAN					
Springfield, MO	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
St. Louis, MO	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Corpus Christi, TX	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Des Moines, IA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Austin, TX	2 yr.				
Charlotte, NC	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Akron, OH	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Fort Worth, TX	*3 yr.				
Prince George Co., MD					
Memphis, TN	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Colorado Springs, CO	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sarasota Co., FL					
Omaha, NE	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Denver, CO	2 yr.				
Dallas, TX	2 yr.		X	X	
Arlington, VA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Orange Co. CA					
Sacramento, CA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Saint Paul, MN					
Tallahassee, FL	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Shreveport, LA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
VA Beach, VA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Broward Co. FL	1 Shift Mo.				
Baltimore, MD			X		
Minneapolis, MN	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Long Beach, CA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Fresno, CA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Albuquerque, NM	2 yr.		X		X
Los Angeles, CA	2 yr.	X	X	X	
Richmond, VA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Buffalo, NY					X
San Angelo, TX	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Note. (*) Identifies departments that have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining firefighters as dispatchers.

Table 3 (continued)

I CITY/COUNTY STATE/COUNTRY	II MINIMUM COMMITMENT	III INCENTIVE PAY	IV BENEFICIAL SHIFT HOURS	V OVERTIME	VI PROMOTION
Winnipeg, CAN	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mississauga, CAN	*1 ½ yr.				
Calgary, CAN	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Surrey, CAN	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Worcester, MA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Jackson, MS	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Orange Co., FL	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Chicago, IL	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Edmonton, CAN	*2yr.				
Boston, MA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Indianapolis, IN	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Fremont, CA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Montgomery, Co., MD	*2yr.	X			
Honolulu, HI	*				
Gwinnett, Co., GA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Tacoma, WA	*2yr.				
Ventura Co., CA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Rochester, NY	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Prince William Co., MD	2yr.				
Hartford, CT	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Columbus, OH	*1yr.				
Santa Clara Co., CA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Brisbane, AUS					
Fairfax Co., VA	*	X			X
Detroit, MI	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Grand Rapids, MI	*				X
Ottawa, CAN					
Perth, AUS	*3yr.				
Cincinnati, OH					
Halifax, CAN	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Washington, D.C.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Nashville, TN	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Columbus, SC	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Oakland, CA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Las Vegas, NV	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Tucson, AZ	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Note. (*) Identifies departments that have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining firefighters as dispatchers.

The goal of the fourth and final research question was to determine how many, if any, comparable metropolitan fire departments have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers; what were the problems, and what methods were these departments using to solve the problems?

The survey research identified ten departments that have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as dispatchers. These departments are identified in Table 3. The average population of the jurisdictions that were experiencing critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as dispatchers at the time of the survey, was fairly representative of the City of Houston's population of 1.8 million. Shown below are the ten comparable metropolitan fire departments that have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers. The critical problems and the methods used to solve the problems are also identified.

The City of Fort Worth, Texas Fire Department is currently experiencing problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as dispatchers because the department recently changed the dispatch shift from a desirable 24-hour rotating shift to a less desirable, 12-hour shift configuration. As a staff retention method, the department requires a three-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The Mississauga Fire and Emergency Services is experiencing critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers because Mississauga firefighters look down on dispatch work and don't believe dispatching is part of a firefighters job description. In an effort to mitigate the staffing problems, the department requires a year and a half length of service commitment from personnel selected for dispatch assignment.

The Edmonton Emergency Response Department is experiencing critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers because of long dispatch shift hours. In order to mitigate the problem, the department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The Montgomery County Fire Rescue Service is currently experiencing an extremely high dispatcher turnover rate because uniform firefighters have the option of returning to more desirable field assignments. The department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment. Additionally, the department provides incentive pay for all classified firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The Honolulu Fire Department is experiencing critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers because Honolulu firefighters consider the duties associated with dispatching undesirable when fire station duty is always an option. The department does not utilize any staff recruiting and retention methods.

Tacoma, Washington is experiencing difficulty retaining firefighters as dispatchers because of the positions tendency to cause burnout. The department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The City of Columbus, Ohio Fire Department is having difficulty maintaining adequate dispatch staffing while newly selected firefighter dispatchers fulfill the department's three month dispatcher training requirement before being assigned dispatch duties. The Columbus Fire Department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The City of Grand Rapids, Michigan Fire Department is unable to attract sufficient numbers of firefighters to fill dispatch positions because firefighters prefer the 24 hour rotating

shift enjoyed by suppression personnel to the 12-hour shift utilized in the dispatch office. As a recruiting aid, an assignment to the Dispatch Office is a promotion.

The Perth Fire Emergency Services is experiencing critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters with the right blend of experience and enthusiasm to dispatch duty. Because supervisors are qualified Fire Officers, it is very difficult to entice experienced officers away from fire duty. The Perth Fire Department requires a three-year length of service commitment from all firefighters selected for dispatch assignment.

The Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department is experiencing critical problems recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as dispatchers because of an unfavorable work shift and the confined environment inherent to the dispatch office. The department selects firefighters for the position of dispatcher from a civil service promotional list of firefighters who have placed high enough on the list to be selected for an available dispatch position. Additionally, the department provides incentive pay for all classified personnel selected for dispatch assignment.

The surveyed dispatch offices share many common problems. Of the 71 departments that responded to the survey, 28 or 39% utilized uniformed personnel as dispatchers in some manner. Of the 28 departments that utilized firefighters as dispatchers, 10 or 36% have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining firefighters as dispatchers. Eight of the ten departments that have experienced critical problems recruiting and retaining classified dispatch personnel identified unfavorable shift hours or the option to return to field assignment as the primary reason firefighters are unwilling to remain in the dispatch office. An unexpected finding derived from the survey data is that the 24-hour shift configuration is identified as both a detriment and an incentive to dispatcher recruitment. For example, the cities of Los Angeles, Dallas, Baltimore and Grand Rapids identified the 24-hour shift configuration as an enhancement of the dispatch

position, while the cities of Edmonton and Mississauga identified long dispatch hours as a detriment to the dispatch position. The conclusions drawn by Edmonton and Mississauga is supported by the Fire Department Communications Manual's (FEMA, 1995) assertion that consideration must be given to employee effectiveness on shifts that exceed 12 hours.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research compared very favorably with the findings of others discussed in the literature review. All agree that there is a crisis involving the recruitment and retention of public safety dispatchers. "Over the last five years, more and more agencies are finding it difficult to find qualified people to work as dispatchers and even more difficulty retaining these dispatchers" (Miraglia, 1996, p. 96). Strock (1996) noted that it was difficult to find uniformed firefighters who were willing to work as dispatchers. The survey finding that 10 of the 28 departments utilizing firefighters as dispatchers have experienced critical recruiting and retention problems supports Strock's conclusion.

An efficient Dispatch Office has always been the most essential element of a successful fire department communications center. However, the modern fire department now expects the dispatcher to do more than just act as a conduit between the emergency caller and emergency responder tasked with the responsibility of emergency incident mitigation. The modern fire department communications center requires a telecommunications staff of career minded professionals who recognize the jobs potential to positively impact peoples lives on a daily basis. Firefighter safety, in some cases, is totally dependent on the quality and quantity of information provided by the dispatchers. Holt (1991) noted that dispatchers play a critical role in regards to firefighter safety. Schaper (1998) pointed out that, "employee selection for the position of dispatcher is paramount" (p. 2-21). These two statements by Holt and Schaper supports Pivetta's

(1993) assertion that agencies face liability if they do not employ skilled and knowledgeable dispatch workers.

Based on the results of a comprehensive analysis of the data presented, it appears the intent of the research to provide information that will allow the Houston Fire Department to develop the best practices for recruiting and retaining classified personnel as dispatchers has been accomplished. The research clearly identified methods and techniques that comparable jurisdictions were using to mitigate or solve dispatcher-staffing problems. However, it should be noted that the research information that identified specific mitigation methods used by these jurisdictions was excerpted from the survey included in this paper and not from published literature. For example, the City of Los Angeles has been very successful at recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as emergency dispatchers. The city uses all five of the methods the research identified as effective in attracting and retaining firefighters as dispatchers. The Los Angeles Fire Department requires a two-year length of service commitment from all firefighters promoted to the dispatch office. In addition to the two-year service commitment, the department provides a bonus and overtime to firefighters who accept dispatch positions. The department believes their 24-hour platoon shift configuration is also an enhancement to the position. The departments' belief is supported by the survey's findings, which indicated 73% of the surveyed jurisdictions utilized a work shift other than the traditional eight-hour work shift. Actions taken by the City of Los Angeles in support of its dispatch operation, solidly supports other writers who have contributed to this research paper. Strock (1996) concluded that a high starting salary, a sound training program, and an employment contract was needed to overcome the reluctance of firefighters to accept dispatch duties. Strock (1996) also noted that dispatchers are less affected by stress in jurisdictions where they are able to transfer back to the field for relief. Los Angeles

City firefighters are allowed to transfer back to the field upon completion of a two year dispatch commitment. It appears the five-dispatcher staff retention and recruiting methods uncovered in this paper could easily be adapted for use by the Houston Fire Department.

The obvious organizational implication of the study results is that the citizens of Houston will be placed at significant risk if the Houston Fire Department is unable or unwilling to adequately staff the Dispatch Office. Additionally, the department will be forced to hire untested civilian dispatchers if the recommendations of this study are not immediately implemented. As noted by Strock, (1996) it is difficult to find firefighters who want to become dispatchers. However, civilians are readily available to accept the position.

Protecting life and property from fire and other emergencies is the mission of the fire service and we cannot accomplish this mission unless we place adequate and appropriate personnel to the task. Fischel (1996) found that throughout the country where 9-1-1 centers failed to perform as expected with disastrous results, close analysis of the situation, after the fact, found the cause to be a chronic pattern of understaffing. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that the Houston Fire Department maintains a communications center that is fully staffed with highly motivated and well-trained uniformed dispatchers who are knowledgeable of suppression and EMS operations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this applied research project was to identify how comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments were recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers and to utilize the findings to recommend appropriate remedies that would assist the Houston Fire Department recruit and retain classified dispatch personnel. The project has

uncovered evidence supporting a recommendation that the Houston Fire Department implement the following dispatcher's staff recruiting and retention remedies.

Minimum Commitment

The department should implement a length of service commitment for all personnel selected for dispatch duty. Upon completion of the length of service commitment, the department must guarantee re-assignment for those members who desire a return to field duty.

Incentive Pay

The department should provide additional pay as an incentive to personnel selected for dispatch assignment.

Beneficial Shift Hours

The department should implement a 12-hour shift configuration that will allow four days off between shifts.

Overtime

The department should implement a policy that will allow regular overtime in order to maintain minimum staffing levels.

Promotion

The department should allow the dispatch position to be filled by members promoted to the suppression captain's rank, thereby, increasing the pool of potential dispatchers.

Dispatch support

- The department must make a commitment to maintain a communications center that is fully staffed with highly motivated and well-trained uniformed dispatchers.
- The department should administer a job aptitude examination for all firefighters selected for dispatch duty.

- The department should provide a working test period for all personnel selected for dispatch duty.
- The department should create a training program designed to foster better understanding of the dispatcher's job by field personnel.
- The department should commit to a training program that will allow dispatch personnel to participate in formal training programs away from the dispatch office.

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APPENDIX A
Dispatch Center Survey Cover Letter

December 1, 1998

Name
Title
Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Fire Chief:

We are conducting a nationwide survey among Metropolitan Fire Chiefs and upper-level managers in fire and rescue services. The purpose of this survey is to gather viable information on how comparable metropolitan fire and rescue departments are recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers. The information gathered from your completed survey will be utilized to develop procedures that will assist the Houston Fire Department recruit and retain classified personnel as dispatchers. Your answers will also allow the Houston Fire Department to choose the best practices for recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as dispatch personnel.

It will only take a short time to answer the simple questions in the enclosed questionnaire and to return it in the reply envelope or you may fax it to (713) 247-3303. Also, you may E-mail your response to: (tpatters@hfd.ci.houston.tx.us).

Of course, all answers are confidential and will be used only in combination with those of other Fire Chiefs and upper-level fire service managers.

If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the survey findings, just write your name and address at the end of this questionnaire and we will gladly send you a complimentary copy when it is completed.

Please return the completed questionnaire at your earliest convenience.

Thanking you in advance,

T. E. Patterson,
Chief Fire Alarm Dispatcher
Houston Fire Department

APPENDIX B

DISPATCH CENTER SURVEY

1. Department/Agency Name _____

2. What is the population of the area served? _____

3. Number of fire stations? _____

4. What is size of area served in square miles? _____

5. Number of personnel in your department? _____

6. Please check the category that best describes your department's communications center's method of dispatcher staffing.

- ☐ 1 Civilian
- ☐ 2 Uniformed Firefighter
- ☐ 3 Combination – Uniformed Firefighters and Civilians
- ☐ 4 Other _____

7. Type of service provided by your department's communications center: (Check all that apply).

- ☐ 1 Fire/EMS Dispatching
- ☐ 2 Fire Dispatching
- ☐ 3 EMS Dispatching
- ☐ 4 EMS Pre-arrival Instructions
- ☐ 5 EMS Call-Taking
- ☐ 6 Fire Call-Taking

8. Please describe your dispatch work shift configuration. _____

9. How many Fire incidents per year does your communications center handle?_____

10. How many EMS incidents per year does your communications center handle?_____

11. How does your department select firefighters for dispatch assignment?_____

12. If any, what requirements does your department have for ensuring that firefighters selected for dispatch assignment remain in the dispatch office for a specified period? _____

13. If any, what recruiting and staff retention methods does your department use to maintain adequate dispatcher staffing?_____

14. If any, what problems has your department experienced in recruiting and retaining classified firefighters as fire and EMS dispatchers?_____

15. In you opinion, what are the advantages of your department's method of Dispatcher staffing? _____

16. In your opinion, what are the disadvantages of your department's method of Dispatcher staffing? _____

(For a copy of survey findings, please provide your name and address in the spaces below.)

Name _____

Address _____